

Is Technology Creating a Family Divide?

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Nowhere is the impact of popular culture and technology on children's relationships more noticeable than in families. Both influences have contributed to a growing divide between the traditional roles that children and their parents play while, at the same time, blurring those same lines between parents and children. Over the past two decades, children who, for example, watch television, have received messages from popular culture telling them that parents are selfish, immature, incompetent, and generally clueless, for example, from *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Tool Time*, *Family Guy*, *Two and a Half Men*, and *I Hate My Teenage Daughter*, not to mention reality TV shows such as *Super Nanny* and the *Housewives* franchise.

This divide has grown due to the increased use of technology among children in several ways. First, children's absorption in technology, from texting to playing video games, does by their very nature limit their availability to communicate with their parents. In fact, with headphones on or earbuds inserted, children are less likely to engage with their parents in any way, whether a simple greeting or a lengthy conversation.

Second, as digital immigrants, parents can struggle to gain proficiency and comfort with the new technology that their digital-native children have already mastered. This divergence in competence in such an important area of children's lives makes it more difficult for parents to assume the role of teacher and guide in their children's use of technology. Because of the lack of technological acumen on the part of many parents, they lack the authority, at least in the eyes of their children, to regulate its use. Due to parents' anxiety or apprehension about the use of technology, they may be unwilling to assert themselves in their children's technological lives. Because of their children's sense of superiority and lack of respect for parents' authority in these matters, children may be unwilling to listen to their parents' attempts to guide or limit their use of technology.

Third, computer and mobile technology have provided children with an independence in their communications with friends and others. Consider this. In previous generations, if children wanted to be in touch with a friend, they had to call them on the home phone which might be answered by a parent. Thus, parents had the opportunity to monitor and act as gatekeepers for their children's social lives.

Times have changed. New technology offers children independence from their parents' involvement in their social lives, with the use of mobile phones, instant messaging, and social networking sites. Of course, children see this technological divide between themselves and their parents as freedom from over-involvement and intrusion on the part of their parents in their lives. Parents, in turn, see it as a loss of connection to their children and an inability to maintain reasonable oversight, for the sake of safety and over-all health, of their children's lives. At the same time, perhaps a bit cynically, children's time-consuming immersion in technology may also mean that parents don't have to bother with entertaining their children, leaving them more time to themselves.

There is little doubt that technology is affecting family relationships on a day-to-day level. Children are instant messaging constantly, checking their social media, listening to music, surfing their favorite web sites, and

watching television or movies. Because of the emergence of mobile technology, these practices are no longer limited to the home, but rather can occur in cars, at restaurants, in fact, anywhere there's a mobile phone signal. It's not only the children who are responsible for the growing divide between parents and their offspring. Parents can be equally guilty of contributing to the distance that appears to be increasing in families. They are often wrapped up in their own technology, for example, talking on their mobile phones, checking email, or watching TV, when they could be talking to, playing with, or generally connecting with their children.

Interestingly, parents have attempted to counteract this growing divide not with actual face-to-face communication with their children, but by joining their children in cyberspace. A phenomenon that has caused considerable debate involves parents "friending" their children on Facebook (about 50 percent). Some parents use Facebook to keep track of their children's coming and goings. Other parents friend their children as a means of feeling closer to them. So what is their children's reaction to being "friends" with their parents? An informal survey I conducted of dozens of teenagers found that the dominant reaction can best be characterized as "EEEWW!" Most children don't want their parents to be their "friends" or their friends, for that matter.

The fact is that family life has changed in the last generation quite apart from the rise of technology. The size of homes has grown by 50 percent, meaning family members can retreat to their own corners of the house, so there's less chance that parents and children will see each other. Because everyone is so busy with work, school, and extracurricular activities, there's less time for families to spend together. At technology to the mix and it only gets worse. It's gotten to the point where it seems like parents and children are emailing and texting each other more than they're talking -- even when they're at home together!

The ramifications of this distancing are profound. Less connection -- the real kind -- means that families aren't able to build relationships as strong as they could be nor are they able to maintain them as well. As a result, children will feel less familiarity, comfort, trust, security, and, most importantly, love from their parents. There is also less sharing which means that parents know less about what is going on in their children's lives and, consequently, have less ability to exert influence over them. Parents are also less able to not only offer appropriate supervision and guidance, but, at a more basic level, they are less able to model healthy behavior, share positive values, and send good messages to their children.

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